

Society for History Education

Radicals and the Making of American Democracy: Toward a New Narrative of American History

Author(s): Harvey J. Kaye

Source: *The History Teacher*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Feb., 1995), pp. 217-225

Published by: Society for History Education

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/494487>

Accessed: 07/01/2010 17:47

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use, available at <http://www.jstor.org/page/info/about/policies/terms.jsp>. JSTOR's Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at <http://www.jstor.org/action/showPublisher?publisherCode=history>.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is a not-for-profit service that helps scholars, researchers, and students discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content in a trusted digital archive. We use information technology and tools to increase productivity and facilitate new forms of scholarship. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.



Society for History Education is collaborating with JSTOR to digitize, preserve and extend access to *The History Teacher*.

<http://www.jstor.org>

Radicals and the Making of American Democracy: Toward a New Narrative of American History

Harvey J. Kaye

University of Wisconsin, Green Bay

WHEN THE IDEA OF A ROUNDTABLE SESSION in which I would participate at the annual meeting of the Organization of American Historians on “American Radicalism Reconsidered” was first posed, I thought it an excellent idea.¹ However, I had reservations on second thought, not about what I might say regarding “radicalism,” because that subject has always been central to my work—in the 1970s in my graduate studies in Latin American history and in the 1980s in my work on E. P. Thompson and the British Marxist historians—but, rather, about the modifier “American.”² I found it a little daunting because I was a recent arrival in the field of American history. It is important, therefore, to explain how I came to my involvement in co-editing books about American radicalism.³

What drove me to become a student of American radicalism were the political and ideological campaigns of the new right Republicans—most especially their use and abuse of the past and their efforts to harness historical study and thought to the creation of a new conservative hegemony. I was convinced that historians were failing to appreciate and, as a consequence, failing to adequately confront these efforts. Let’s not forget such things as Reagan’s posthumous conscription of radicals and liberals—from Tom Paine to FDR—to the ranks of conservatism; his lines situating the Nicaraguan contras as “freedom fighters” in the tradition of

the American Revolutionaries of 1776; and his remarks disparaging those who had fought in the Spanish Civil War as volunteers in the Abraham Lincoln Brigade. Nor should the efforts of William Bennett and Lynn Cheney to rewrite our history and humanities curricula be ignored.⁴

In addition to the new right's politics of history, there were two related problems which demanded a response—the crisis of the American left and the crisis of American history and narrative—both of which might be expressed as questions: “What does it mean to be a radical?” and “What does it mean to be an American?” Usually these are discussed separately; occasionally, however, they are discussed together though too often it is in order to declare radicals to be entirely or at least somewhat “un-American.”

An example of this appeared not long ago on the Op-Ed page of the *Sunday New York Times*. Under the title of “The Unpatriotic Academy,” the celebrated philosopher, Richard Rorty, attacked the “academic left” for promoting multiculturalism rather than a single national identity.⁵ Like Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. in his book, *The Disuniting of America*,⁶ Rorty conflated the promoters of particularism with the contemporary academic left as a whole, failing to distinguish separatists and ethnocentrists from multiculturalists and critical historians. He felt constrained to go on and warn the left about being “unpatriotic,” and with much of what he wrote I am sympathetic:

If, in the interests of ideological purity, or out of the need to stay as angry as possible, the academic left insists on a “politics of difference,” it will become increasingly isolated and ineffective. An unpatriotic left has never achieved anything. A left that refuses to take pride in its country will have no impact on the country's politics, and will eventually become an object of contempt.

However, to the extent that Rorty and Schlesinger are defining American radicalism and the left as “un-American,” I find their writings alarming and threatening.

In defense of the radical historian and the left tradition let me ask if it wasn't a radical vision of the purpose and promise of historical study and thought which originally attracted so many of us to the discipline—the vision of historians as “citizen-scholars” contributing to the democratic struggles and movements of the day by engaging and enlarging historical memory, consciousness, and imagination? Recall the 1974 Draft for a Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians Organization's “Statement of Principles”:

History is practically the only academic discipline in which the possibilities of human experience, the creativeness of human action, is still a major object of study; and for which general literacy is the only prerequisite for

accessibility.... The distinctiveness is decisive and should be cultivated. Historians are best situated to show not only that liberation is necessary, but also that it is possible.⁷

What I am arguing for, and what is central to the work I have recently co-edited with Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle, *The American Radical*,⁸ and to a larger project on American radicalism,⁹ is the intimate and progressive relationship between the radical tradition and the making of American history.

The American Radical is intended to serve as a “stock taking.” Additionally, in view of the politics of the present day and related crises of the American left and American history and narrative, my co-editors and I hoped it would contribute to a renewed appreciation of the place of American radicalism in American life. We decided on a biographical approach because we imagined it the most effective way to reach students and, potentially, extra-academic audiences. It was not to be a reference or a textbook (though it could be), but rather a “gathering” of representative figures. In short, we wanted to exhibit the historical breadth, cultural diversity, political and ideological pluralism, variety of struggles and movements, and manifold means of engagement and expression which have characterized radicalism in this country.

As Eric Foner suggests in his foreword to our volume, one way of reminding ourselves about what the past thirty years have entailed is to consider *The American Radical* alongside previous works of its sort, for example, Charles A. Madison’s study, *Critics and Crusaders* (1947),¹⁰ and Harvey Goldberg’s edited collection, *American Radicals* (1957)¹¹—both of which are valuable books regardless of the flaws we now may see. There are obvious and significant differences among the three volumes, surely determined to some extent by their respective historical moments. For a start, Madison included only two women (Margaret Fuller and Emma Goldman) among his eighteen “critics and crusaders”; and, even worse, Goldberg’s sixteen radicals are all men. Moreover—and I know this further reveals my naïveté—I was surprised to find that there was not a single non-white figure in the ranks of either Madison’s or Goldberg’s rebels.

In contrast, our forty-six American radicals include men and women of diverse backgrounds because, as Eric Foner observes, “radicals have been as diverse as the American people themselves.” Of course, conservative reviewers will refer to the multicultural composition of *The American Radical* as evidence of Buhle, Buhle and Kaye’s commitment to “political correctness.”

The table of contents of the three books registers yet another important development. Madison divides his critics and crusaders into “Abolitionists—Utopians—Anarchists—Dissident Economists—Militant Liberals—

and Socialists.” And Goldberg similarly arranges his by aspiration and practice: “Declarations of Independence—Attacks on Privilege—Toward the Equality of Rights—[with an additional section devoted to] Obstacles to Radicalism.” However, the portraits in *The American Radical* are merely arranged chronologically without specific reference to cause or campaign.

I do not think we were being lazy in failing to group our chapters thematically. Rather, I think that here too the difference is a reflection of our respective historical moments and the readings of American history afforded by the different times of authorship. It’s not just that the initiatives of the last thirty years have dictated a fuller, richer and more pluralistic conception of American radicalism. Our conception today is one which encompasses independence fighters (e.g., Pontiac and Neolin, and Tom Paine), laborists (e.g., Eugene Debs, Mother Jones, and Ricardo Flores Magon), suffragists (e.g., Elizabeth Cady Stanton), abolitionists (e.g., Sojourner Truth, Abby Kelley, and Frederick Douglass), socialists (e.g., Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, W. E. B. Du Bois, Upton Sinclair, Vito Marcantonio, and Michael Harrington), feminists (e.g., Fanny Wright, Emma Goldman, and Isadora Duncan), pacifists (e.g., Dorothy Day, A. J. Muste, and Abbie Hoffman), environmentalists (e.g., John Muir and Rachel Carson), and campaigners for social justice and the civil rights of the oppressed (e.g., Walt Whitman, Ida B. Wells, Carlos Bulosan, Malcolm X, and Audre Lorde).¹²

It is also, I believe, that we have today a more critical understanding both of the radical tradition as a “tradition” and of its role in the making of America. The question which we, as historians, will have to consider is: Have we effectively communicated and cultivated these understandings?

Written immediately after World War II in the wake of the New Deal and the victory over fascism, the narrative which frames Madison’s *Critics and Crusaders* is one of progress towards “social democracy,” a continuous process enabled or, at the least, enhanced by the endeavors of radicals. To quote from his introductory and concluding remarks:

The quest for freedom has been a basic characteristic of the American people from the very beginning.... There were always enough bold spirits ready to fight for the greater freedom of all.... This much is true: every battle for freedom has resulted in an expansion of human rights.... It was a continuous struggle because new wrongs always arose. [Yet] Notwithstanding their theoretical confusion and wide practical divergence, the various groups opposing the status quo have achieved notable success in their work to strengthen the democratic base of the American people.... The sum of social legislation enacted in recent years is of a truly revolu-

tionary character. [And] It is at least partly due to the agitation of these critics and crusaders that the American people are at present enjoying a combination of political freedom and economic well-being which is the envy of the world.

Furthermore, in response to the question—"What of the future?"—Madison declared that "The outcome is fairly obvious.... The doctrines of 'free enterprise' and 'rugged individualism' have gone the way of human slavery and the horse and buggy.... Social planning and control are both necessary and unavoidable." In Madison's view, the only issue which remained was just how "liberal" things would be.

A decade later—in the heyday of the postwar liberal consensus, Pax Americana and the suppression of radicalisms at home and abroad—Goldberg and his co-author of the Introduction, William Appleman Williams, advanced a quite different and far more sombre view of things. As they saw it:

The United States has had its radicals, a fair number, at times acting alone and at times in concert; men who devoted themselves exceedingly well to the common weal.... But the truth must be faced, however disillusioning, that the richest tradition of American radicalism belongs to a small minority of courageous men and women; that their achievements, while outweighing their numbers, included neither a lasting mass movement nor a profound shift of power; that a greater number of radicals than these have failed to measure up to the standards of profundity and constancy required of them.

In contrast to the progress, continuity, accomplishment, and optimism offered by Madison, Goldberg and Williams speak of tragedy and irony, discontinuity and defeat, and offer reasons to be pessimistic. In fact, they spend most of their time discussing the obstacles to, and failings of, American radicals, before closing with admonitions and an urgent call for renewal:

To date radicalism...has failed to bring profound changes or to build a lasting movement. However comprehensible this is in the light of the American dream, the instruments of power, and the relentless demands on courage, it is tragic. But the failures themselves are meaningful instruction.... To borrow a bit of imagery..., we might conclude that American radicalism stands at its last frontier. The expansionist philosophy of history has carried the United States to the last roundup where a nation confronts itself.... The issue is clear: who is to outline, plan, and direct America's effort to live at peace with itself and the world?.... It remains the radical's present opportunity and responsibility to demonstrate and then substantiate his claim to power.

In the wake of the long 1980s, one might readily assume that the historical perspective framing Buhle, Buhle and Kaye's *The American*

Radical would echo the views and sentiments of Goldberg and Williams rather than those of Madison. But that is not the case. To be sure, after twenty years of concerted class war from above and political and cultural campaigns seeking to reverse the changes wrought in the thirties or initiated in the struggles of the sixties, there is no restoring a confident and progressive optimism about the advance of social democracy, justice and civil rights. Nevertheless, our experience and our scholarship—however much recording discontinuities and defeats—also register persistence, accomplishments and even reasons for hope.

Our many contributors might not agree; but the lives and campaigns they present in their respective chapters of *The American Radical*—reflecting a generation of historical labors pursued from the bottom up—speak to the rearticulation of our national experience. As we state in our afterword:

The narrative of America emergent in these pages is the struggle for liberty, equality and democracy. It is a narrative insisting that we recognize and appreciate the crucial role of the radical tradition as the prophetic memory of American experience—the tragic, the ironic, the progressive—and of the persistent and original possibilities to be found there. As these biographical portraits begin to account, in every generation men and women of diverse upbringings and identifications have stood to challenge oppression and exploitation and to reassert the fundamental proposition that “We, the People” shall rule. However varied their respective concerns and aspirations, America’s radical activists, writers and artists have conducted a long and continuing struggle to expand both the “we” in “We, the People” and the democratic process through which “the people” can genuinely govern.

Admittedly, American history can be told in many ways; but what I have learned is that the narrative we fashion as historians—and we are fashioning one whether we intend it or not, and whether postmodernists like it or not—must, without guaranteeing anything, testify to the central and dynamic role of the radical tradition in the making of American democracy.

Madison evidently exaggerates when he proclaims that “There were always enough bold spirits ready to fight for the greater freedom of all,” for there have never been enough of such souls; and he is plainly “speechifying” when he writes that “This much is true: every battle for freedom has resulted in an expansion of human rights,” for history has never been so wonderful.

Yet he is closer to the historical experience than are Goldberg and Williams when they portray American radicals as a rare breed of brave and, often, isolated and lonely men whose legacy is overwhelmingly

more that of aspiration than accomplishment. Undeniably, many an American dissenter has stood alone and suffered scorn and abuse; but, contrary to the myth of heroic alienation or marginality, not only have American radicals regularly been numerous (and even occasionally ubiquitous), their endeavors have often been bound up with the struggles of communities and popular movements, and their legacy, however marked by tragedy and defeat, is not merely visionary but equally inspiring for its history-making.

The radical tradition truly has been our “prophetic memory,” recalling, refashioning and extending in original and creative ways the promise and possibility of freedom, equality, and collective self-determination. In the face of multiple obstacles and oppositions, American radicalism itself has hardly been singular; and yet, in far more than the minds of historians it has been a tradition of remarkable continuity. As we denote in our Introduction, succeeding generations of radicals have drawn inspiration and sustenance from the agency and ideas of their predecessors. Moreover, this has repeatedly entailed remembrance and aspiration across lines of race, ethnicity and gender.

What I have said may be obvious to most historians, especially those that lean left; but it is not so obvious to our fellow Americans. We have done well in critically recovering America’s past and the place of the American radical tradition within it, and we are hardly finished. But have we done as much and as well in communicating and connecting our work to popular historical memory, consciousness and imagination? As the great French historian and patriot, Marc Bloch, asked during the long night of German Occupation: “Most of us can say with some justice that we were good workmen [before the war]. Is it equally true to say that we were good citizens?”¹³

Recalling what originally drew us to history, I would argue quite brashly that along with recounting the experience of expansion, exploitation and oppression we remain obligated intellectually and politically to cultivate a popular understanding of the making of past, present and future which appreciates that radicalism actually has been at the heart of what it means to be an American.¹⁴ This becomes all the more imperative in the face of the apparent success by the powers that be in propagating cynicism, the sense that action, especially political action, is irrelevant. And, having served on the original Organization of American Historians’ Task Force (1992) to review the project establishing National Standards in History, I remain very worried about the “past and present” which will be taught in our schools. My concerns are due to what I found in the foundation text, *Lessons From History*, which seemed to me to be a narrative of techno-economic determinism which marginalized the tradi-

tions of dissent and struggle from below, especially those of socialists, the labor movement and the working-class.¹⁵

I am not so naïve or romantic as to believe that the historical redemption and popularization of the radical tradition will necessarily reinvigorate the prophetic memory of American democracy, which to be sure, though enervated and fragmented, persists in older and newer social movements alike. Yet, I would insist that we can contribute far more than we have to the reformation of historical memory, consciousness and imagination. And, towards that end, the chapters of *The American Radical* do testify that campaigns for justice can succeed and struggles for liberty, equality and democracy can prevail.

As my editorial predecessor, Harvey Goldberg, stated in his foreword back in 1957, on the eve of those most unexpected and startling sixties:

For very compelling reasons, the study of American radicals should be essential homework for this generation: because their record can give heart and stomach to Americans who are watching democracy weaken under the weight of conformism; and because their insights and errors, their accomplishments and failures can cast light, even many years later, on the problems of the present.¹⁶

Notes

1. This essay was prepared for "Radicalism Reconsidered," a roundtable session of the 87th Annual Meeting of the Organization of American Historians held in Atlanta, April 14-17, 1994. The chair of the session was Mari Jo Buhle and the other presenters were Doug Monroy and Barbara Ransby.

2. For example, see Harvey J. Kaye, *The British Marxist Historians* (Cambridge, MA: Basil Blackwell, 1985) and *The Education of Desire: Marxists and the Writing of History* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

3. Besides *The American Radical* discussed in this paper, a book series, American Radicals, which I am editing with Elliott J. Gorn. The first two volumes, on Michael Harrington and William Appleman Williams, will appear in spring, 1995.

4. For the record, the co-editors with me of *The American Radical*, Mari Jo Buhle and Paul Buhle, while they may be responsible for a lot of my thinking, are not to be held accountable for anything I say.

5. Richard Rorty, "The Unpatriotic Academy," *The Sunday New York Times*, February 13, 1994, p. E15.

6. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America: Reflections on a Multicultural Society* (New York: Norton, 1992), originally published as a Whittle Book, 1991.

7. Mid-Atlantic Radical Historians Organization (MARHO), "A Draft Statement of Principles" (1974), reprinted in *The Journal of American History* 76 (September 1989), 487-88.

8. Mari Jo Buhle, Paul Buhle, and Harvey J. Kaye, eds., *The American Radical* (New York: Routledge, 1994).

9. See note 3 above.

10. Charles A. Madison, *Critics & Crusaders: A Century of American Protest* (New York: Henry Holt & Co., 1947).

11. Harvey Goldberg, ed., *American Radicals: Some Problems and Personalities* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1957).

12. The persons noted in parentheses do not represent the full contents of the book, and it should be recognized that the struggles of these radicals were by no means limited to the "causes" alongside their names. For example: Emma Goldman's politics were not only feminist, but also anarchist; W. E. B. Du Bois was a socialist and a campaigner for racial justice and equality; Abbie Hoffman's radical career included anti-war and environmental activities.

13. Marc Bloch, *Strange Defeat: A Statement of Evidence Written in 1940*, translated by Gerard Hopkins (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1949), p. 173.

14. Harvey J. Kaye, *The Powers of the Past: Reflections on the Crisis and the Promise of History* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992).

15. The National Center for History in the Schools at UCLA, *Lessons From History: Essential Understandings and Historical Perspectives Students Should Acquire*, ed. by Charlotte Crabtree, et al. (University of California, Los Angeles and the National Endowment for the Humanities, 1992).

16. Goldberg, *American Radicals*, p. ix.